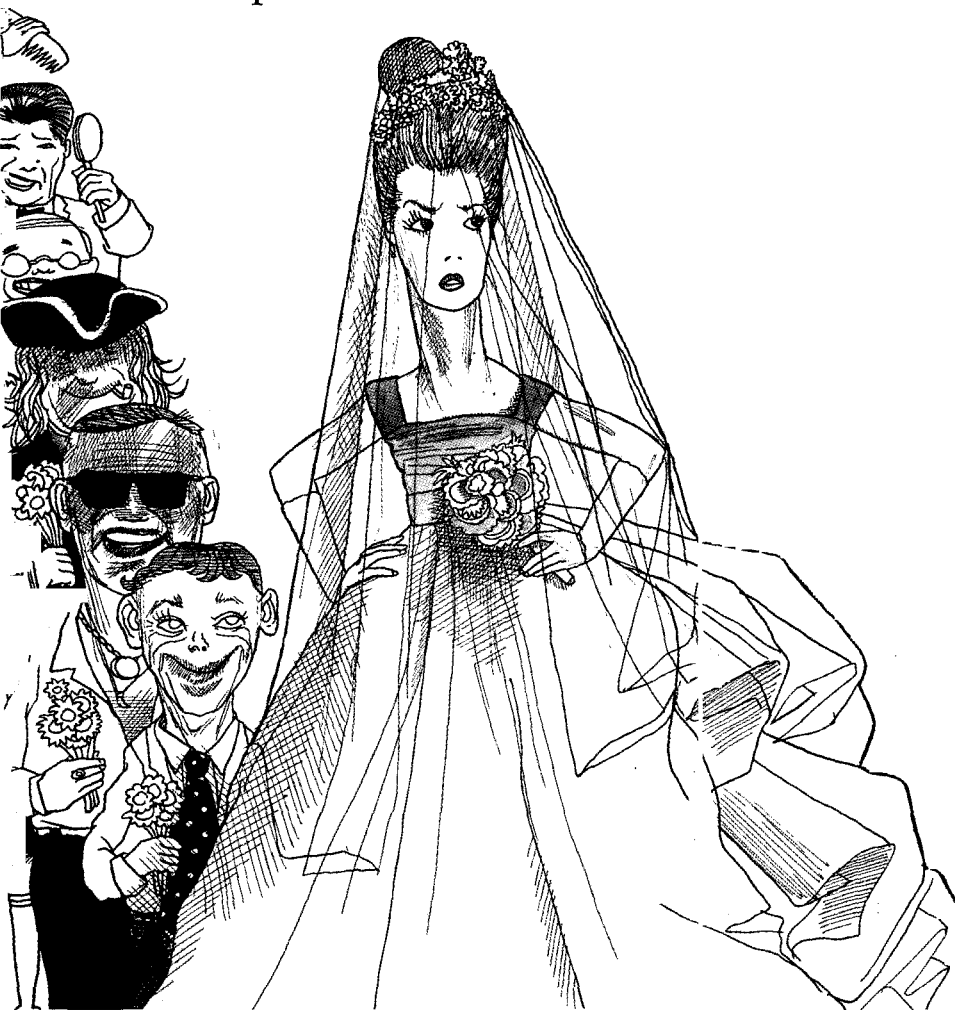


# What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us

Delaying marriage comes with a price—  
not a prince, observes *Danielle Crittenden*



OUR GRANDMOTHERS, WE are told, took husbands the way we might choose our first apartment. There was a scheduled viewing, a quick turn about the interior, a glance inside the closets, a nervous intake of breath as one read the terms of the lease, and then the signing—or not. You either felt a man's charms right away or you didn't. If you didn't, you entertained a few more prospects

until you found one who better suited you. If you loved him, really loved him, all the better. But you also expected to make compromises. The view may not be great, but it's sunny and spacious (translation: he's not that handsome, but he's sweet-natured and will be a good provider).

Whether you accepted or rejected him, however, you didn't dawdle. My late mother-in-law, who married at

twenty, told me that in her college circles in the mid-1950s, a man who took a woman out for more than three dates without intending marriage was considered a cad. Today, the man who considered marriage so rashly would be thought a fool. Likewise, a woman.

Instead, like lords or sailors of yore, a young woman is encouraged to embark upon the world, seek her fortune and sow her oats, and only much later—closer to thirty than twenty—consider the possibility of settling down. Even religious conservatives, who disapprove of sex outside of marriage, accept the now-common wisdom that it is better to put off marriage than do it too early. The popular radio host, Laura Schlessinger, traditional in so many of her views, constantly tells her listeners not to consider going to the altar much before thirty. In 1965, nearly 90 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine were married; by 1996, only 56 percent of women in this age group were. Indeed, the more educated and ambitious a woman is the more likely she is to delay marriage and children, the Census Bureau reports. And if she doesn't—if such a young woman decides to get married, say, before she is twenty-five—she risks being regarded by her friends as a tragic figure, spoken of the way wartime generations once mourned the young man killed in battle: "How unfortunate, with all that promise, to be cut down so early in life!"

I remember congratulating a young woman upon her recent marriage to a friend of mine and commenting perfunctorily that both of them must be very happy. She was twenty-four at the time. She grabbed my hand, held it, and said with emotion, "Thank you!" As it turned out, I'd been the only woman to offer her congratulations

without immediately expressing worry that she'd done the wrong thing. Her single female friends had greeted her wedding announcement as a kind of betrayal. A few had managed to stammer some grudging best wishes. Her best friend nearly refused to be a bridesmaid. They simply couldn't fathom why she'd tossed away her freedom when she was barely out of college. And she, in turn, couldn't convince them that she really had met the man she wanted to marry, that she didn't want to keep going out to bars in the evenings and clubs on the weekends, postponing her marriage for half a decade until she reached an age that her friends would consider more suitable.

In this sense, we lead lives that are exactly the inverse of our grandmothers'. If previous generations of women were raised to believe that they could only realize themselves within the roles of wife and mother, now the opposite is thought true: It's only outside these roles that we are able to realize our full potential and worth as human beings. A twenty-year-old bride is considered as pitiable as a thirty-year-old spinster used to be. Once a husband and children were thought to be essential to a woman's identity, the source of purpose in her life; today, they are seen as peripherals, accessories that we attach only after our full identities are up and running.

And how are we supposed to create these identities? They are to be forged by ourselves, through experience and work and "trial" relationships. The more experience we have, the more we accomplish independently, the stronger we expect our character to grow. Not until we've reached full maturity—toward the close of our third decade of life—is it considered safe for a woman to take on the added responsibilities of marriage and family with-

out having to pay the price her grandmother did for domestic security, by surrendering her dreams to soap powders, screaming infants, and frying pans. But there is a price to be paid for postponing commitment, too. It is a price that is rarely stated honestly, not the least because the women who are paying it don't realize how onerous it will be until it's too late.

**I** REMEMBER HAVING, in my early twenties, long and passionate conversations with my female friends about our need to be strong, to stand alone, to retain our independence and never compromise our souls by succumbing to domesticity. And yet at the same time, we constantly felt the need to shore each other up. We'd come across passages in books—paeans to the autonomy of the individual, replete with metaphors of lighthouses, mountains, the sea, etc.—copy them out carefully (in purple ink, on arty cards), and mail them to each other. It was as if despite our passion for independence, despite our confidence in ourselves as independent women, we somehow feared that even a gentle gust of wind blowing from the opposite direction would send us spiraling back into the 1950s, a decade none of us had experienced first-hand but one that could induce shudders all the same.

Our skittishness was all the more surprising given that most of my friends' mothers, as well as my own, worked at interesting jobs and had absorbed as deeply as we had the cultural messages of the time. When I look back upon it, I think our youthful yearning to fall in love must have been enormously strong and at war with our equally fierce determination to stay free. We were fighting as much a battle against ourselves as against the snares of domesticity. And if one of us

were to give way, the rest would feel weakened in our own inner struggles, betrayed by our friend's abandonment of the supposedly happy, autonomous life. For the truth is, once you have ceased being single, you suddenly discover that all that energy you spent propelling yourself toward an independent existence was only going to be useful if you were planning to spend the rest of your life as a nun or a philosopher on a mountaintop or maybe a Hollywood-style adventuress who winds up staring into her empty bourbon glass forty years later wondering if it was all damn worth it. In preparation for a life spent with someone else, it was not going to be helpful.

And this is the revelation that greets the woman who has made almost a religion out of her personal autonomy. She finds out, on the cusp of thirty, that independence is not all it's cracked up to be. "Seen from the outside, my life is the model of modern female independence," wrote Katie Roiphe in a 1997 article for *Esquire* entitled "The Independent Woman (and Other Lies)." "I live alone, pay my own bills, and fix my stereo when it breaks down. But it sometimes seems like my independence is in part an elaborately constructed facade that hides a more traditional feminine desire to be protected and provided for: I admitted this once to my mother, an ardent seventies feminist...and she was shocked.... I rushed to reassure her that I wouldn't dream of giving up my career, and it's true that I wouldn't."

Roiphe then goes on to puzzle over how a modern woman like herself could wish for a man upon whom she could depend. "It may be one of the bad jokes that history occasionally plays on us," she concluded, "that the independence my mother's generation wanted so much for their daughters

was something we could not entirely appreciate or want.”

Unfortunately, this is a bit of wisdom that almost always arrives too late. The drawbacks of the independent life, which dawned upon Roiphe in her late twenties, are not so readily apparent to a woman in her early twenties. And how can they be? When a woman is young and reasonably attractive, men will pass through her life with the regularity of subway trains; even when the platform is empty, she'll expect another to be coming along soon. No woman in her right mind would want to commit herself to marriage so early. Time stretches luxuriously out before her. Her body is still silent on the question of children. She'll be aware, too, of the risk of divorce today, and may tell herself how important it is to be exposed to a wide variety of men before deciding upon just one. When dating a man, she'll be constantly alert to the possibilities of others. Even if she falls in love with someone, she may ultimately put him off because she feels just “too young” for anything “serious.” Mentally, she has postponed all these critical questions to some arbitrary, older age.

But if a woman remains single until her age creeps up past thirty, she may find herself tapping at her watch and staring down the now mysteriously empty tunnel, wondering if there hasn't been a derailment or accident somewhere along the line. When a train does finally pull in, it is filled with misfits and crazy men—like a New York City subway car after hours; immature, elusive Peter Pans who won't commit themselves to a second cup of coffee, let alone a second date; neurotic bachelors with strange habits; sexual predators who hit on every woman they meet; newly divorced men taking pleasure wherever they

can; embittered, scorned men who still feel vengeful toward their last girlfriend; men who are too preoccupied with their careers to think about anyone else from one week to the next; men who are simply too weak, or odd, to have attracted any other woman's interest. The sensible, decent, not-bad-looking men a woman rejected at twenty-four because she wasn't ready to settle down all seem to have gotten off at other stations.

Or, as it may be, a woman might find herself caught in a relationship that doesn't seem to be going anywhere or living with a man she doesn't want to marry. Whatever her circumstances, the single woman will suddenly feel trapped—trapped by her own past words and actions—at the same moment other desires begin to thrust themselves upon her.

So much has been written about a woman's “biological clock” that it has become a joke of television sitcoms: career women who, without warning, wake up one morning after thirty with alarm bells ringing in their wombs. Actually, the urge for children and everything that goes with them—not just a husband, but also a home and family life—often comes on so gradually that it's at first easily brushed away. What a woman is aware of, at around the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven, is a growing, inchoate dissatisfaction, a yearning for more, even if her life is already quite full. Her apartment feels too quiet, her work, no matter how exciting or interesting, is less absorbing, and her spare time, unless packed with frenetic activities, almost echoes with loneliness: Think of an endless wintry Sunday afternoon unbroken by the sound of another voice.

She starts noticing the mothers all around her—especially young, attractive mothers—pushing strollers down

the street, cooing at their babies in supermarkets, and loading up their shopping carts with enormous quantities of meat, vegetables, cans, jars, boxes of detergent, and packages of diapers, as she purchases a few meager items for her own dinner. All the horrors she once connected with babies—their noise and messiness, their garish plastic toys, their constant crying and demands that wear down and dull even the most strong-minded of women—are eclipsed by their previously underestimated virtues: their cuteness, their tiny shoes and mittens, their love and wonder, and, perhaps most enviable of all, the change of life they cause, pulling a woman out of herself and distracting her from her own familiar problems.

ALAS, IT'S USUALLY at precisely this moment—when a single woman looks up from her work and realizes she's ready to take on family life—that men make themselves most absent. This is when the cruelty of her singleness really sets in, when she becomes aware of the fine print in the unwritten bargain she has cut with the opposite sex. Men will outlast her. Men, particularly successful men, will be attractive and virile into their fifties. They can start families whenever they feel like it. So long as a woman was willing to play a man's game at dating—playing the field, holding men to no expectations of permanent commitment—men would be around, they would even live with her! But the moment she began exuding that desire for something more permanent, they'd vanish. I suspect that few things are more off-putting to a man eating dinner than to notice that the woman across the table is looking at him more hungrily than at the food on her plate—and she is

not hungry for his body but for his whole life.

So the single woman is reduced to performing the romantic equivalent of a dance over hot coals. She must pretend that she is totally unaware of the burning rocks beneath her feet and behave in a way that will convince a man that the one thing she really wants is the furthest thing from her mind. She might feign indifference to his phone calls and insist she's busy when she's not. When visiting friends who have small children, she might smile at them or politely bat them away or ask questions about them as if they're a species of plant and she's not someone particularly interested in botany. Whatever she does, though, she cannot be blamed for believing, at this point in her life, that it is men who have benefited most from women's determination to remain independent. I often think that moderately attractive bachelors in their thirties now possess the sexual power that once belonged only to models and millionaires. They have their pick of companions, and may callously disregard the increasingly desperate thirtyish single women around them, or move on when their current love becomes too cloying. As for the single woman over thirty, she may be in every other aspect of her life a paragon of female achievement; but in her romantic life, she must force herself to be as eager to please and accommodate male desire as any 1920s cotillion debutante.

A WOMAN'S DECISION to delay marriage and children has other consequences—less obvious than the biological ones and therefore harder to foresee. It is not simply the pressure of wanting a baby that turns those confident twenty-five-year-old single career women

you see striding through busy intersections at lunch hour, wearing sleek suits and carrying take-out salads to eat at their desks, into the morose, white wine-drinking thirty-five-year-old executives huddled around restaurant tables, frantically analyzing every quality about themselves that might be contributing to their stubbornly unsuccessful romantic lives.

By spending years and years living entirely for yourself, thinking only about yourself, and having responsibility to no one but yourself, you end up inadvertently extending the introverted existence of a teenager deep into middle age. The woman who avoids permanent commitment because she fears it will stunt her development as an individual may be surprised to realize in her thirties that having essentially the same life as she did at eighteen—the same dating problems, the same solitary habits, the same anxieties about her future, and the same sense that her life has not yet fully begun—is stunting, too.

For when a woman postpones marriage and motherhood, she does not end up thinking about love less as she gets older but more and more, sometimes to the point of obsession. Why am I still alone? she wonders. Why can't I find someone? What is wrong with me? Her friends who have married are getting on with their lives—they are putting down payments on cars and homes; babies are arriving. She may not like some of their marriages—she may think her best friend's husband is a bit of a jerk or that another one of her friends has changed for the worse since her marriage—but nonetheless, she will think that at least their lives are going forward while her gearshift remains stuck in neutral. The more time that passes, the more the gearshift rattles, the more preoccupied

the woman becomes with herself and all her possible shortcomings in the eyes of men until she can think about little else.

This may be the joke that history has actually played upon us—and a nasty one it is. The disparity in sexual staying power is something feminists rather recklessly overlooked when they urged women to abandon marriage and domesticity in favor of autonomy and self-fulfillment outside the home. The generation of women that embraced the feminist idealization of independence may have caused havoc by walking away from their marriages and families, but they could do so having established in their own minds that these were not the lives they wanted to lead: Those women at least had marriages and families from which to walk away. The thirty-three-year-old single woman who decides she wants more from life than her career cannot so readily walk into marriage and children; by postponing them, all she has done is to push them ahead to a point in her life when she has less sexual power to attain them.

Instead, she must confront the sad possibility that she might never have what was the birthright of every previous generation of women: children, a family life and a husband who—however dull or oppressive he might have appeared to feminist eyes—at least was there. As this older single woman's life stretches out before her, she'll wonder if she'll ever meet someone she could plausibly love and who will love her in return or whether she's condemned to making the rest of her journey on the train alone. She might have to forgo her hope of youthful marriage and the pleasure of starting out fresh in life with a husband at the same stage of the journey as herself. She may have to consider looking at men who are much



older than she is, men on their second and third marriages who arrive with an assortment of heavy baggage and former traveling companions. These men may already have children and be uninterested in having more, or she'll have to patch together a new family out of broken ones. Or, as time passes and still no one comes along, this woman might join the other older single women in the waiting rooms of fertility clinics, the ones who hope science will provide them with the babies that the pursuit of independence did not.

FROM A FEMINIST view, it would be nice, I suppose—or at the very least handy—if we were able to derive total satisfaction from our solitude, to be entirely self-contained organisms, like earthworms or amoebas, having relations with the opposite sex whenever we felt a need for it but otherwise being entirely contented with our own company. Every woman's apartment could be her Walden Pond. She'd be free of the romantic fuss and interaction that has defined, and given meaning to, human existence since its creation. She could spend her evenings happily ensconced with a book or a rented video, not having to deal with some bozo's desire to watch football or play mindless video games. How children would fit into this vision of autonomy, I'm not sure, but surely they would infringe upon it; perhaps she could simply farm them out.

If this seems a rather chilling outcome to the quest for independence, well, it is. If no man is an island, then no woman can be, either. And it's why most human beings fall in love, and continue to take on all the commitments and responsibilities of family life. We want the noise and embrace of family around us; we want, at the end of our lives, to look back and see that

what we have done amounts to more than a pile of pay stubs, that we have loved and been loved, and brought into this world life that will outlast us.

We strengthen a muscle by using it, and that is true of the heart and mind, too. By waiting and waiting and waiting to commit to someone, our capacity for love shrinks and withers. This doesn't mean that women or men should marry the first reasonable person to come along, or someone with whom they are not in love. But we should, at a much earlier age than we do now, take a serious attitude toward dating and begin preparing ourselves to settle down. For it's in the act of taking up the roles we've been taught to avoid or postpone—wife, husband, mother, father—that we build our identities, expand our lives, and achieve the fullness of character we desire.

Still, critics may argue that the old way was no better; that the risk of loss women assume by delaying marriage and motherhood overbalances the certain loss we'd suffer by marrying too early. The habit of viewing marriage as a raw deal for women is now so entrenched, even among women who don't call themselves feminists, that I've seen brides who otherwise appear completely happy apologize to their wedding guests for their surrender to convention, as if a part of them still feels there is something embarrassing and weak about an intelligent and ambitious woman consenting to marry. But is this true? Or is it just an alibi we've been handed by the previous generation of women in order to justify the sad, lonely outcomes of so many lives?

What we rarely hear—or perhaps are too fearful to admit—is how liberating marriage can actually be. As nerve-racking as making the decision can be, is it also an enormous relief once it is made. The moment we say,

"I do," we have answered one of the great crucial questions of our lives: We now know with whom we'll be spending the rest of our years, who will be the father of our children, who will be our family. That our marriages may not work, that we will have to accommodate ourselves to the habits and personality of someone else—these are, and always have been, the risks of commitment, of love itself.

What is important is that our lives have been thrust forward. The negative—that we are no longer able to live entirely for ourselves—is also the positive: We no longer have to live entirely for ourselves! We may go on to do any number of interesting things, but we are free of the growing wonder of with whom we will do them. We have ceased to look down the tunnel, waiting for a train.

The pull between the desire to love and be loved and the desire to be free is an old, fierce one. If the error our grandmothers made was to have surrendered too much of themselves for others, this was perhaps better than not being prepared to surrender anything at all. The fear of losing oneself can, in the end, simply become an excuse for not giving any of oneself away. Generations of women may have had no choice but to commit themselves to marriage early and then to feel imprisoned by their lifelong domesticity. So many of our generation have decided to put it off until it is too late, not foreseeing that lifelong independence can be its own kind of prison, too. ♦

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IF THEY THINK about them at all, many people see librarians the same way Eudora Welty did in *One Writer's Beginnings*: "I never knew anyone who's grown up in Jackson without being afraid of Mrs. Calloway, our librarian. [I]f you were a girl, she sent strong eyes down the stairway to test you; if she could see through your skirt she sent you straight back home: you could just put on another petticoat if you wanted a book...from the public library."

Fifty years ago, a critic for the *Saturday Review* wrote that a certain book was about as "interesting as sex with a librarian." Well, today there's no need to put on that extra petticoat. Sex with a librarian might still be boring, but the library itself may prove interesting after all. Sex is in libraries all over the country—right next to fiction and the reference sections, wherever the library's computers are up and running.

Walk up to any facility's public computer terminals and you could be confronted by what can only be described as presidential activity staring back at you. Because the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*—the American Library Association's (ALA) holy text on First Amendment issues—frowns upon labeling, sequestration, filtering or any notification or warning about explicit materials, most public libraries have fast become the chief purveyors of pornography via the Web. And because libraries account for half of all Internet access outside the home,

# Sex in the Stacks

Your local library may be the best place for your child to view porn, writes *Mark Herring*



Internet pornography is widely available to children. What may be strictly forbidden in the home, in other words, is readily available in public libraries, compliments of tax-payer dollars—and if a recent Virginia court ruling stands—with state approval.

In what the *Washington Post* described as "the first case of its kind," a Virginian district court judge ruled last November that a Loudoun County library "cannot use computer filters to

prevent adults from viewing sexually explicit material on the Internet, even though the restrictions were meant to protect minors." Of course there may be a bright side. Remember how hard it used to be getting kids to the library? The trick now will be getting them to come home!

This is all greeted as so much good news by the ALA, the official organization representing 50,000 of our nation's librarians. The ALA has, for the past three decades, been desperately trying to shed the image of librarians as prim, bun-haired guardians of public taste and moral standards. Disbelieving readers should surf over to ALA's own web site at [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org). Its "Great Internet Sites for Young Adults," links children directly to "Go Ask Alice," Columbia University's Health Education Program's site for teen questions about sex. Here curious tots may find answers to such burning questions as "Achy-Breaky Blueballs"; "Orgasms, Female Ejaculation and the G-Spot"; "Optimizing Solo Sex"; "Lesbian Oral Sex: It is Better to Give Than to Receive"; "Conservative Considers Coitus"; and "Masturbating Friends."

THE ALA'S PROGRESSIVE stance on sex is actually not surprising, given the political views that have come to dominate the organization. For the last thirty years, the ALA has, like so many other oversized, government-funded vehicles, become bogged down in leftist politics. The ALA, via rank-and-file librar-